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Safecracker Saga Tests CIA's Openness

Central Intelligence Agency Director Robert M. Gates says it's a new day at the CIA—time to shed some sunlight on musty CIA secret files, including those on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Proof of Gates's new-found openness will be whether those files include the embarrassing saga of a renegade safecracker.

It began one morning in the summer of 1978 in the offices of the House Assassinations Committee. The committee had the job of reinvestigating the Kennedy assassination to determine if a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald, did it. A committee staff member showed up at work one morning to find the door to the safe propped open and the contents—particularly the Kennedy autopsy photos—rifled.

G. Robert Blakey, then chief counsel to the committee and now a professor at Notre Dame, called in some Washington police officers to take fingerprints. Everyone on the committee staff was fingerprinted. The one set on the safe that shouldn't have been there belonged to a CIA security officer whose job was to shuttle classified documents requested by the committee from the CIA headquarters in Langley to Capitol Hill.

Blakey stormed over to Langley for a meeting with then-CIA Director Stansfield Turner. His deputy, Frank C. Carlucci, later President Ronald Reagan's defense secretary, was there too.

"What's your guy doing in my safe?" Blakey demanded. He is now reluctant to talk about the details from that point, but sources told us that Turner and Carlucci were aghast to learn about the break-in. Relations between the CIA and the Assassinations Committee were already strained. Some committee members suspected the CIA was part of a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, and was being less than forthright about sharing what it knew.

One former committee staff member told us that they weren't surprised to find the autopsy photos were the target of a CIA break-in. The CIA reportedly never had the photos in its own records and was itching to lay hands on them.

To this day, those grisly photos have been kept a secret at the request of the Kennedy family. But they have long been the centerpiece of a controversy about JFK's wounds and the second-gunner theory.

The break-in of the committee's safe was shaping up to be a fine conspiracy indeed, except that it wasn't a conspiracy at all. It apparently was the work of a curious CIA employee who just wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

The accused officer spoke with our associate Dale Van Atta recently on the condition that he not be named. He didn't deny that he broke into the safe, but he didn't confirm it either. "They had no grounds to accuse me of anything," he said. "There was nothing missing and nothing stolen from the safe."

He was hauled in at Langley and put through an eight-hour polygraph examination. He figured the committee was out to get him because he had complained that they "had very poor security" with the documents.

He was eventually fired. Blakey confirmed that the CIA decided the incident was "no big deal. It was nothing more sinister than that he was curious."

But the committee didn't let the CIA off the hook. Former committee staff members and CIA sources told us that the committee cleverly used the incident to ensure the CIA's enthusiastic cooperation with the rest of the investigation.

"We hushed it up, and the CIA was so grateful, a veritable waterfall of documents came our way," one staff member recalled. "Practically anything we wanted for our investigation, we got without complaint."

The U.S. Postal Service's Express Mail boasts a 95 percent success rate with its next-day service. But the Postal Service discovered that a guarantee wasn't enough, especially when something as important as an expert-witness list absolutely positively had to be in Dayton, Ohio, overnight. Attorneys defending the Postal Service against an employment discrimination suit had until Aug. 1 to file their witness list. They sent the list from Philadelphia via Express Mail July 30. Guaranteed delivery time was noon the next day. But the list didn't arrive until 10 days later. The Pony Express could have carried it faster. The lawyer representing the Postal Service filed a motion with the court to submit the list late, blaming slow mail service. A Postal Service spokesman in Philadelphia told us they're trying to figure out what happened.

